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ABSTRACT

The assessment and placement of language minority students remain among the most serious problems facing schools today. As of 1990, 14 percent of the school-aged population in the United States comes from language minority backgrounds. Significant numbers of these students are not being properly identified by educators. Assessment procedures in a school often reflect local politics as well as student needs, and thus, no single universally acceptable model has been developed for any aspect of the language assessment process. Still, all districts must determine which students to assess and develop testing mechanisms. In most cases information from teachers and the Home Language Survey act as screening mechanisms for schools to determine if further evaluation is necessary. Various achievement and language proficiency tests have been developed to determine student eligibility for language or other services. Although tests should measure all aspects of language skill, many only evaluate oral skills. Improvements in assessment could take the form of "Student Centers" designed to ensure the equitable treatment of incoming language minority students; multiple assessment methods with teacher involvement in the evaluation; and parent participation in the process. Offers 13 references. (JB)

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON URBAN EDUCATION

DIGEST

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THE ASSESSMENT AND PLACEMENT OF LANGUAGE MINORITY STUDENTS

In the fall of 1992, a nine-year-old boy from Bejing, China, came to New York City. His neighborhood school, without asking his parents about his language abilities or testing him—either one of which would have shown that he spoke no English—placed him in a monolingual English fourth grade classroom. There, his teacher, who did not believe in the value of bilingual education or English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, gave him a Chinese-English dictionary and expected him to learn the language on his own. Needless to say, he did not do well in class.

Background

Unfortunately, the boy from China is not unique; as of 1990, a full 14 percent of the school-aged population in the United States came from language minority backgrounds, an increase of 38 percent over 1980 ("Census Reports," 1992). In cities like Los Angeles, the growth in the enrollment of language minority students has outstripped the growth in total district enrollment—a trend likely to continue (Wasney & Wilde, 1987).

Significant numbers of these students are not being properly identified by educators. A recent study of Asian and Hispanic eighth graders, three-quarters of whom came from bilingual homes, found that teachers identified only 27 percent of the Asian students and 39 percent of the Hispanic students as language minority (Bradby, Owings, & Quinn, 1992).

Although the 1974 Supreme Court decision in *Lau v. Nichols* required schools to provide LEP students with educational opportunities reflecting their language needs, it did not specify how to do this. Accordingly, districts across the country have met the law's requirements with a wide variety of services, including transitional bilingual programs, pullout ESL classes, individualized courses of study, and even sink-or-swim English "immersion" classes.

Most districts place new language minority students into age-appropriate grade levels, but they must also determine whether the students need bilingual or ESL services. And, unfortunately, the accurate identification of students for language services—as distinct from other compensatory services—remains among the most serious problems facing schools today (Rossell & Baker, 1988).

The Range of Policies

Because the story of bilingual education in the United States has been as much about political controversy as about actual practices, assessment procedures in a school often reflect local politics as well as student needs. And, since the number of students in special programs often determines financial support, funding polices can have a direct impact upon student placement (Clements, Lara, & Cheung, 1992).

Thus, no single universally accepted model has been developed for any aspect of the language assessment process; the screening and evaluation of students vary widely from state to state and even from school to school. Still, all districts must address two fundamental issues with regard to their students: (1) determine which students to test; and (2) develop the testing mechanism.

Identification. Some districts attempt to evaluate all incoming students to identify those in need of language services, while others simply place students into classes and wait until problems emerge; some districts fall somewhere in between. In New York City, for example, all students with Hispanic surnames are automatically evaluated, while others are evaluated only if there is some reason to do so. This policy, instituted in 1975 as a "temporary" measure in the wake of a lawsuit brought against the city's schools by the city's Puerto Rican community (Santiago, 1986), remains in place today.

Assessment. Some districts have few, if any, formalized assessment procedures, while others perform extensive multi-dimensional testing (De George, 1988). Still, most districts employ some combination of measures, including one or more of the following (Department of Education, 1991):

- information from teachers, or teacher referrals;
- information from parents, often in the form of a formalized Home Language Survey;
- evaluation of records from previous schools;
- appraisal of the student's academic level; and
- appraisal of the student's language skills.

Most common among these alternatives is some variety of formalized testing, with 49 states using either language proficiency exams, criterion-referenced achievement tests, or both. Thirty states use information from teachers and 27 use a Home Language Survey to screen students (Department of Education, 1991). Unfortunately, none of these methods is ideal, in large part because there is no national consensus on a workable definition of an limited English proficient (LEP) student (Department of Education, 1991).

Teacher Information and the Home Language Survey

In most cases, information from teachers and the Home Language Survey act as screening mechanisms for schools to determine if further evaluation is necessary. Of the two, the Home Language Survey is the most standardized, since teacher information can be subjective. The California Home Language Survey, which is supposed to be given to all incoming students, and is typical, asks four questions (California State Department of Education, 1989):

- What language did your son or daughter learn when he or she first began to talk?
- What language does your son or daughter most frequently use at home?
- What language do you use most frequently to speak to your son or daughter?
- What language is most often spoken by the adults at home?

If the answer to any question is something other than English, the student must take a language proficiency exam.

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While the Survey can provide important student information, some parents, whether out of fear (particularly if they are undocumented residents), misunderstanding, or a desire to ensure that their children are placed in mainstream classrooms, may indicate that English is spoken in the home even if it is not (Clements et al., 1992; De Avila, 1990). Still, if used carefully—and if the parents actually visit the school rather than simply fill out a form—the Home Language Survey can be both a useful assessment tool and an important method for establishing a home-school relationship (Nelson, 1986).

Testing Mechanisms

A wide variety of achievement and language proficiency tests has been developed to determine student eligibility for language services or special education programs. To be as accurate and effective as possible, the tests should be coordinated to measure all aspects of student language use, including both oral and written proficiency, and comprehension in both English and the student's native language (Clements et al., 1992).

Unfortunately, many states evaluate only oral skills when testing students for placement, including those states which use the Language Assessment Scales (LAS), the most widespread of language proficiency tests (De George, 1988; Williams & Gross, 1990). This practice measures a minimum level of language proficiency, but bypasses the more complex language skills that students must master in order to succeed in school.

The use of a single test to determine eligibility for language services is made even more problematic because the criteria for such eligibility—often only an arbitrary cut-off in test scores—vary greatly among states and even within districts.

How To Improve Assessments

Great care is needed to develop truly equitable and useful mechanisms for identifying language minority students and providing them with appropriate services, since no uniform or single fully adequate measure exists. Further, while it is important to maintain some degree of school autonomy in determining assessments to meet local needs (Rood, 1989), state and district support must supplement school initiatives.

Student Centers. Some districts, as in Philadelphia, have founded "Welcome Centers" designed to ensure the equitable treatment of incoming language minority students in multicultural schools (Brenner, 1989). Although they still rely on referrals from local schools, these centers have some control over the assessment of language minority students, and can provide a sympathetic setting. In addition, because the centers specifically address the needs of the language minority population, they can serve not only as testing sites, but also as clearinghouses for student health services and parent support facilities.

Multiple Assessment Methods. Since research demonstrates that no single practice can work in isolation, schools should set in motion multiple testing mechanisms. Because teachers often have the most direct knowledge of their students' abilities, they must continue to be involved in their evaluation, preferably through formalized channels (Nelson, 1986; Rossell & Baker, 1988). In addition, parents should actively consult on Home Language Surveys, not simply fill out a form. Finally, standardized tests should measure all aspects of students' language use, not just achievement or oral skills; they should be only one measure among several, and never the sole means of determining eligibility for language services (Nelson, 1986).

Clearly, the experiences of the boy from China are not unique. He, though, is lucky; at the insistence of his parents, he is now in a different school, where he has received help with his English language skills as a supplement to his normal curriculum. His English—and his performance in the classroom—has improved dramatically.

— Gary Burnett

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